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German bishops expand sex abuse guidelines

By MELISSA EDDY and KIRSTEN GRIESHABER (AP)

BERLIN — Germany's Roman Catholic church introduced new guidelines Tuesday on handling reports of sexual abuse that require prosecutors to be informed of any suspected case unless the victim objects to that.

The expanded guidelines come in response to hundreds of allegations of abuse at the hands of clergy that emerged earlier this year and rocked the church in Germany, Pope Benedict XVI's homeland.

Most cases date back years, if not decades, and the statute of limitations has passed on the majority of them. Often victims were afraid to report abuse, and the Catholic Church has been accused of covering up abuse cases it knew about, and not telling prosecutors about them.

Stephan Ackermann, the bishop of Trier who was tapped by church authorities to lead the revision of guidelines drawn up in 2002, said special attention had been given to the issue of involving law enforcement officials.

"Because in the past it has led to misunderstandings, I stress again that the investigations by church authorities and by prosecutors are parallel investigations," Ackermann told reporters in Trier on Tuesday.

The earlier guidelines only "advised" that priests contact prosecutors on their own in "proven cases" of abuse. Church authorities were not required to contact law enforcement officials.

Yet critics charged Tuesday that the revamped rules do not go far enough in addressing the issue of abuse, by failing to clarify issues of financial compensation for victims and by allowing offending clergy to continue to serve within the church.

"Once he has been an offender, we really don't want someone like that in the diocese anymore, even working in a nursing home or a prison," said Christian Weisner of the We Are Church group, insisting there should be a "zero tolerance" policy on abuse in Germany.

Under the new guidelines, offenders are to be removed from jobs involving work with children and to undergo assessment by professionals to indicate what kind of jobs they are to be allowed to do.

The German government said it welcomed the bishops' efforts to work more closely with prosecutors, but criticized the fact that the new guidelines left open what the church would do if a victim demanded that prosecutors not get involved.

Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger said the basic principle should be one of "immediately informing prosecuting authorities about suspected cases."

Ackermann argued that many victims would shy away from informing the church at all if that meant prosecutors would have to get involved immediately.

The American victims' group SNAP criticized the new guidelines as inadequate in general.

"The problem isn't inadequate policies, it's a corrupt structure and system in which bishops exercise virtually limitless power and are accountable to virtually no one," Barbara Blaine of the American victims' group SNAP told The Associated Press.

However, the new rules require each diocese to have at least one "commissioner" who is not part of its leadership to serve as the first point of contact for anyone wishing to report a case of suspected abuse by clerics, monks, employees or volunteers working for the church.

The rules also say that as soon as there are any credible indications of sexual abuse of minors a church figure "shall forward the information to the state criminal prosecution authority."

The new guidelines define what is considered sexual abuse based on the definition used by common German law and require that suspected offenders be immediately removed from any duties that involve contact with children and young people.

Prevention measures include requiring anyone who works with children or youths to show proof of good conduct and undergo sensitivity training for personnel management.

The Bishops Conference reworked its original guidelines amid criticism that they did not go far enough in involving law enforcement officials in sex abuse cases. The new guidelines are valid for three years, at which point they are to be reviewed again.

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